

“Migration is at home in mobility.”¹

The Arabic word “ghurba” describes the everywhere and nowhere meaning of boundaries. Derivative of the Arabic word for “stranger,” it addresses at once the absence from the homeland as well as the deep yearning for belonging to the homeland. The nation-state is, in fact, contrived, “[t]here is nothing natural or self-evident about attachment to the nation, which is on the contrary established, legitimized, and maintained by complex cultural practices and institutions.”² Growing transnational flows across borders have created a wealth of new levels of membership and affiliation, operating within and across territorial borders such that national borders are being destroyed as people cross them.

In late 2015, we founded the Black Athena Collective, a research and artistic laboratory for experimentation that engages political discourse and territorial logics connected to the Red Sea region from Eritrea to Egypt. The collective was born out of a need to address mobility as a crucial principle for structuring new approaches to territorial convention, citizenship and politicization. Through multi-disciplinary perspectives including geography, sociology and history the Black Athena Collective raises the question of migration as a crucial principle for imagining new conventions of territory. Central to our investigations are the reconstitution of political spaces and the various architectures and forms of reterritorialization.

The collective draws from challenges posed by Martin Bernal’s thesis which questions methodological assumptions embedded within Western historiography. We are specifically interested in confronting the Euro-centric bias of landscape discourse: “[i]s it possible that landscape, understood as the historical “invention” of a new visual/pictorial medium, is integrally connected with imperialism?”³ Our approach opposes the predatory view of landscape discourse, especially within the context of colonialism on the African continent. Given the unstable nature of spatial politics in Africa (the militarization of the region through technological warfare, particularly in North Africa with its strategic positioning in relation to migration) a new discourse on visual responses to landscape of the region is necessary, one that does not engage the continent as a fixed category but rather as an uneven and entangled terrain where conceptual operations are assembled and contested. We speak of a migration of images and their constructions as transitory forms moving across ‘bounded’ spaces. Can our art practice and methodology allow us to achieve more complex and definitive ways of thinking and interacting with land?

Through our research and visual explorations, we focus on questions of power in the age of technology and the role of representation, particularly in conflict territories and zones of transmigration, or spaces devoid of citizenry. The project engages the central question of “citizenship” as defined by the nation state and reframes conventional parameters of belonging within the construct of borders and migration. The project proposes a radical re-conceptualization of “citizenship” to initiate a shift towards social change. What are the forms of agency and power contained in being a citizen? Is there power in non-representation?

With images, we are looking at intersections between architectures of place and flows of migrancy, “[a] symmetrical sites where real and imaginary identities are located, projected, memorialized and exchanged,”⁴ vernacular forms that veer away from the semiotics of the exotic. We are confronting the problem of anthropology which has relayed this “idea of an architecture-without-architects...by presenting vernacular built forms as pure and unsullied anthropological ideals.”⁵ We are not interested in the ethno-opolis or the ethno-scape. Rather, where is the counter point to that? What could the counter movement of existing infrastructures look like? The project evokes silenced narratives and seeks alternative connections to examine political spaces by looking specifically at the topos of territory. Ultimately, the image of the ‘politicized’ that takes shape is one that challenges the limits of what comprises a political imagination to begin with.

¹Papadopoulos, Dimitris, Stephenson, Niamh and Vassilis Tsianos. *Escape Routes*. London: Pluto Express, 2008. 220. Print.

²Aranda, Julieta, Brian Kuan Wood and Anton Vidokle, eds. *The Internet Does Not Exist*. Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2015. 73. Print.

³Mitchell, W.J.T. ed. *Landscape and Power*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994. 9. Print.

⁴Cairns, Stephen. “Drifting: Architecture/Migrancy.” *Drifting: Architecture and Migrancy*. Ed. Stephen Cairns. New York: Routledge, 2004. 13. Print.

⁵Cairns, Stephen. “Drifting: Architecture/Migrancy.” *Drifting: Architecture and Migrancy*. Ed. Stephen Cairns. New York: Routledge, 2004. 21. Print.

Black
Athena
Collective

N | O | W | H | E | R | E

is a place



Threewalls: How was Black Athena Collective conceived?

It is 2014, we are traveling across the breadth of west and North Africa into Europe. The itinerary moves us from Nigeria to Ghana, Mali to Mauritania, Morocco to Spain, France to The Netherlands. We travel through these spaces carefully considering the complex histories of movement — forced, voluntary — and the narratives that encapsulate them. We are traveling through these spaces with an eye on the dominant narratives of migrancy and the nuances they cast aside.

The collective was born out of a need to address mobility as a crucial principle for structuring new approaches to territorial convention, citizenship and politicization. Through multi-disciplinary perspectives including geography, sociology and history, the Black Athena Collective addresses the dominant territorial logics and constitution of place versus the transience of individuals; it looks specifically at architecture(s) in relation to errant bodies. We are working with the Red Sea region from Eritrea to Egypt, once considered the center of the world for its significant history of trade, travel, movement and migration. As artists connected to the region, our work proposes new readings of histories that contextualize our contemporary geo-politics.

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TW: We're very excited that you are joining us for EXPO Chicago. Tell us about the work you'll be showing.

Our exhibition at the EXPO represents our first venture in visualizing some of the research material we are working with as a collective. It looks at three strategically located architectural constructions within the contemporary migration narrative (Morocco, Egypt and Eritrea) and places them in relation to histories of moving bodies in Africa. The images are supplemented with historical archives, moving images and performed audio that put forth a new reading of history in the region.

TW: The two of you lead very international lives. What is your method of collaborating? What are the challenges collaborating from disparate locations?

It is not easy to collaborate from across the world, but it makes sense for our project. It allows for different networks to enter our work. Travel is a very big part of the Black Athena Collective and we, therefore, arrange for intensive work trips in the areas we are researching. It seems to be a productive way for us to work. It is not without its challenges, but it allows us the distance to analyze our material and the perspective needed for such a project.

TW: How do you think the work of Black Athena Collective intersects with this moment in the American political climate?

Our work is not necessarily situated within the context of the American political climate but responds to the broader trend of current shifting politics. We recognize the need to put forth narratives from the African continent that challenge the ways in which histories have been told and documented; we further want to address the urgency of contextualizing them within a contemporary construct. Given that both of us are from the African continent yet have spent a significant amount of time in North American and Europe, we are able to speak to a wide range of audiences. The issues we are attempting to tackle are issues that are relevant to a global contemporary situation, including this moment in the American political climate.

TW: In other interviews, Heba mentioned bringing on other collaborators. Is that some-thing we can look forward to anytime soon?

The project is set up so that we are always collaborating with others. Given the nature of our research and the importance of travel in our project, we have to depend on others to access the information and material we want. This means that we collaborate with historians, sociologists, architects, migrants, local residents and anyone who addresses the particular topics we are working with in the Red Sea region from Eritrea to Egypt. Our approach is seemingly anthropological while simultaneously critiquing existing methods and approaches to anthropology. We want to emphasize the collaborative aspect of this project and, as artists from the region, we engage with local people and acknowledge others' involvement as integral to the work that we do.

TW: What is the relationship of your personal practice to the work of the Collective?

We set up the Black Athena Collective as an experimental platform, an artistic research laboratory that allows us to break from the confines of our own individual practices. This collective provides us with an opportunity to experiment with various methodologies in repurposing and recomposing historical materials.

TW: Do you have any other plans or engagements while you are in Chicago?

We are joining three walls at a critical stage of its transition; this is a unique opportunity to rethink how the organization's historical functions can be expanded. Together with Three Walls, we are imagining how concepts of space and concerns of mobility can be located in non-physical structures.

Our time in Chicago will be spent on formal and informal conversations, lectures, and engagement with various publics. The Black Athena Collective is finding ways to propose new methods of collaboration to open up dialogues about transnational cultural exchange whose implications bear significant consequences on local constructs.



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